Painting Without Numbers: My Journey Into Abstraction

Notes & Quotes

Tom Corrado

My kid could do better than that! - Anon

1. Applying paint to a surface opens a door. I use acrylic paint exclusively, scrubbing, scraping, scratching, or removing paint, spraying it with water to extend its life. I push paint not to represent anything or make meaning but simply to engage the act, to play with indeterminacy, with abstraction, with pictures of nothing, thereby better inviting the collaboration of the viewer into the experience of a painting.

2. I'm a dabbler. I've dabbled in paint for decades. Pretty much self-taught. Got a bit serious after a friend opened an art gallery. And a bit more serious after I joined the Upstate Artists Guild in Albany, NY.

3. I don't have the patience for oils. I prefer acrylics. And painting knives instead of brushes.

4. I'm not interested in representation. I like abstraction. The unknown. But abstraction can be intimidating. When I began my journey into abstraction, I felt I needed something to hold onto. Guy ropes so to speak. So I inscribed circles - orbs - onto my first abstract canvases.

5. Abstraction is, after all, denial. Deciding what not to include.

6. No subjects or representations, but colors and movements and textures, guided by the Japanese practice of "zuihitsu," letting the "wandering brush" - or painting knife - take me wherever it wants to go.

7. My fascination with old walls, detritus, and the monochrome informs my painting. I apply layer upon layer of paint, then sand, scrape, scratch, and scrub, moving from the monochrome to variations on that theme. As I apply the paint, I spray the surface with water, thereby adding the element of chance to the

mix. Cagean, yes?

8. One of my favorite books on abstract art is Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock (Princeton, 2006) by the late Kirk Varnedoe, former chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art.

9. With my sculptures, most of which are figurative, I try to pare the subject to its minimum.

10. Varnedoe reminds us that an abstraction often inadvertently looks like something. Perhaps because we need it to look like something. Perhaps because we are uncomfortable with the unknown, pre-wired to try to make sense of the world. To try to understand things.

11. Aluminum! Acrylic paint flows differently on aluminum, and the unpainted surfaces make for interesting transitions. To strengthen the aluminum, I fasten a sheet of panelboard to it using nuts, bolts, and washers.

12. I begin with a color, then start pushing paint around while spraying the surface with water. I go where it takes me, and continue until something clicks, and I stop.

13. In 1877 after seeing James McNeill Whistler's (near abstract) painting Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket, the art critic John Ruskin condemned Whistler for throwing a pot of paint in the public's face.

14. I sometimes scrape off all the paint, and start over.

15. I sometimes dip into representation.

16. Abstraction resides on a continuum spanning likeness to nothingness.

17. I never really separated painting and literature. - Cy Twombly

18. Signing: front or back? Survey says: back! Anything on the painting impacts the experience of the painting. I'll buy that!

19. Agnes Martin (1912-2004) painted the same way for almost 50 years. She often said that all she ever thought about was beauty and happiness. She lived alone for years in an adobe house she built with her own hands. She made a feature-length film about Genghis Khan, which she shot and edited herself. She decided one day that she didn't want it anymore, so she threw it in the garbage. She never owned a television set. She never married or had children. She painted every day from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. She lived her final years in a modest, one bedroom apartment with nothing on the walls. She used most of her money to buy paintings and donate them anonymously to museums. She allowed herself one luxury: a new BMW, white. - Dan Tranberg

20. A mystique exists that Agnes Martin painted very few works but in actuality, she painted almost daily when inspired and that was with some frequency. However, only a relatively small amount of works exist from such a long and productive life because she destroyed most of the works she produced. Probably no artist has ever been a better editor than Agnes Martin. The rejected paintings were shredded with a mat knife. As she grew older, during the last few years, she enlisted the help of friends (myself included) to destroy the unacceptable works, as it was very hard to cut through the thick primed linen fabric. When I once asked her why she was destroying a particularly delicate and beautiful

work, she said, "It's too aggressive, and there's a mistake." Most often that referred to a pooling of colour in one of the works that made the brushstrokes discontinuous. The mistake became an unwanted "focus" in a non-compositional painting, which disturbed its serenity. - Arne Glimcher, Agnes Martin: Paintings, Writings, Remembrances (Phaidon, 2012).

21. For most modern artists, a picture is not a statement, nor does not emerge from a preconceived plan. Every brushstroke, even the first, is a response to something that has occurred before, on the canvas or in the artist's mind or memory, and will influence what happens next. - Calvin Tomkins in a 2006 New Yorker profile of Jasper Johns

22. The less there is to look at, the more important it is that we look at it closely and carefully. - Kirk Varnedoe

23. My main advice to a beginning artist is to just be in your studio and work and not be worried about the art world. I think the art world should take up maybe 10 percent of your time. - Joan Snyder

24. The fear - and freedom - of abstraction.

25. My well-worn copy of Jane Waller's The Human Form in Clay (Crowood, 2001) is a great resource for ideas with its bios, descriptions of working methods, and pictures of sculptures of 50 contemporary artists who use clay to portray the human form.

26. Inspiration is for amateurs, the rest of us just show up and get to work. - Chuck Close

27. A painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience. - Mark Rothko

28. Armed with a camera and Artist's Questionnaire, Joe Fig entered 24 artists' studios and documented their day-to-day creative life, covering everything from how they set a creative mood, how they choose titles, how they organize their studios, which painting tools they prefer, to whether they sit or stand to contemplate their work. It's all in Inside the Painter's Studio (Princeton Architectural Press, 2009).

29. I sit for two or three hours and then in 15 minutes I can do a painting. - Cy Twombly

30. You just go on your nerve. - Frank O'Hara

31. The Essential Cy Twombly (D.A.P., September 30, 2014), edited by Nicola Del Roscio, is the ultimate overview and most accessible survey of Twombly's work to date, presenting paintings and cycles of paintings, drawings, sculptures, and photographs from his diverse oeuvre.

32. Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. - Jasper Johns on making art

33. I worry about the difficulty of making things, or the difficulty of knowing what to do. I may think, having been working at painting all these years, why don't I find it easy, since it's a relatively simple activity? - Jasper Johns

34. On Kawara (1932-2014) was one of the leading figures of Conceptual Art. He was best known for his Today series: monochromatic canvases, whose only image was the date on which they were made, rendered in meticulous white letters that look almost printed against fields of red, black, or gray. In 1997, Kawara placed seven of these in kindergarten classrooms around the globe, a social project he called Pure Consciousness, its title

borrowed from a quote by Leo Tolstoy, referring to the stillness of one's sense of self in relation to the passage of time - a Zen-like idea that suggests paying attention to something as basic as the passage of time.

35. Like in Japanese gardening, you want to allow some leaves to remain when you're sweeping a path so it will feel natural. - John Zurier

36. Painting, for me, is like an excavation site. As I develop layers of line and color and idea, some images are buried and new ones emerge. During the process, I discover meaning in the disparate clues and create a new "civilization" as a painting.... As I "excavate" each theme, the element of surprise keeps me engaged. - Barbara Moody, Montserrat College of Art

37. What's the matter with our art? We're too well qualified. - Morton Feldman

38. We have been trained to see painting as "pictures," with storytelling connotations, abstract or literal, in a space usually limited and enclosed by a frame which isolates the image. It has been shown that there are possibilities other than this manner of "seeing" painting. An image could be said to be real if it is not an optical reproduction, if it does not symbolize or describe so as to call up a mental picture. This "real" or "absolute" image is only confined by our limited perception. - Robert Ryman

39. Agnes Martin's negotiations between image and thought were central to both her art and her often troubled mental life. Not until after the artist's death in 2004 was her diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia publicly revealed. Martin heard voices. Occasionally she fell into catatonic states.

Found wandering the streets during a psychotic episode in 1967, she was committed to Bellevue, where she underwent shock treatment. - Patricia Albers, On the Grid: Two New Books About Agnes Martin, The New York Times Book Review, June 25, 2015

40. It does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. - Mark Rothko

41. Don't think about making art, just get it done. Let everyone else decide if it's good or bad, whether they love it or hate it. While they are deciding, make even more art. - Andy Warhol

42. Stop before you're done.

43. You've been making the wrong mistakes.
- Thelonius Monk

44. There are no mistakes. - Miles Davis

45. You learn to work with mistakes not get derailed by them.

46. Overworking leads to muddiness.

47. Art is never finished, only abandoned. - Leonardo da Vinci

48. One of the valuable things abstraction does more fiercely than a lot of other art is to make us think and read what others think. - Kirk Varnedoe

49. Slow painting is an actual stance, an intention and practice shared by other contemporary painters who, without constituting a movement, collectively insist on a phenomenological experience over a connotative one. - Stephen Westfall, Slow Painting, Art in America, February 2018

50. I swear if I had to do this over again, I would just do the paintings and not show them. - Cy Twombly

51. I'm not an abstractionist. I'm not interested in the relationship of color or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on. - Mark Rothko

52. The secret to Warhol's majesty is that he was a square citizen, untroubled by ambivalence and having no use for irony. - Peter Schjeldahl

53. Only recently, I have let go of that part of me that self-edits. The part that says, "That's too personal, I can't let people see that about me." And, it's not that I am not afraid, I am. It's more of a "do-it-anyway" kind of thing. When I think about my life and my work, three aspirations come to mind: striving for courage, honesty, and generosity. Not so easy. But it is important to let go of any pretense, and just be who I am now. - Margaret Glew

54. I like to think that art should stand on its own, but I can't help but look behind the curtain for information about the artist, how they lived, how they did their art, how they got through their days.

55. Since I was six years old, I have had a penchant for tracing the shapes of things, and since my half centenary, I have produced numerous pictures and illustrations, but nothing I drew before the age of seventy really counts for much. By age seventy-three, I had acquired some understanding of the framework of birds, animals, insects, and fish, and the beginnings of plants and trees. Could it be that, in this way, by age eighty, I will be making even greater progress, and by age ninety, penetrating the inner mysteries of painting, and by age one hundred,

become truly peerless? And so it may be that when I am into my hundred and tens, each dot and each brushstroke will seem to have a life of its own.
- Katsushika Hokusai

56. Marcia Myers (1949-2008) layered the pigments along with marble dust and clear acrylic varnish, combining many layers to achieve the luminous depths and vibrant colors that define her paintings. Instead of layering the powder pigments into fresh plaster as in the frescoes of Pompeii and the Renaissance, she produced her frescoes by layering the pigments and marble dust onto clear varnishes and glazes, thus displaying a thoroughly modern take on the ancient medium. Using the powder pigments allowed her to make the most of each pigment's properties.

57. When I look at a Cy Twombly painting, I feel I'm on the brink of a formulated thought. Something is about to reveal itself. I'm almost there. I just need a couple more words, a couple more letters. I don't necessarily understand it now but I feel I'm about to. Maybe just looking for a couple more minutes will allow me to see something more, find a word, find an image. Twombly's paintings have this ability to prompt curiosity. - The Canvas

58. I often have my paints far away from the painting. This forces me to step back and slow down and look. I need that physical distance from the painting when painting, this distance is very important to me. - Lawrence Carroll

59. My line is childlike but not childish. It is very difficult to fake . . . to get that quality you need to project yourself into the child's line. It has to be felt. - Cy Twombly

60. I have no idea where a painting will end up, but I

will recognize it when that happens. I am not a template painter. This is just not in my nature. I am patiently restless. - Lawrence Carroll

61. The meaning of the work is in the doing of it. - Cy Twombly

62. Art is art when it reaches a point where I can't explain its content . . . beyond understanding, enigmatic. - Suzan Frecon

63. To achieve understanding it is necessary not to see many things, but to look hard at what you do see. - Giorgio Morandi

64. My sculptured heads are looking, waiting with intention, like anonymous poets. - Xavier Toubes

65. As I work on my pieces, I'm aware of them in a very abstract way. And I go back and forth between things that I know I'm referencing and things I'd like to reference. - Huma Bhabha

66. How to draw a line that is not stupid? - Roland Barthes in his essay on Cy Twombly

67. A line is a dot that went for a walk. - Paul Klee

68. Jane Freilicher's paintings struck me at first as tentative, a quality I have since come to admire and consider one of her strengths, having concluded that most good things are tentative, or should be if they aren't. - John Ashbery

69. Art is anything you can get away with. - Andy Warhol

70. The painter is doing what? Copying nature, perhaps, creating abstractions, and everything in between, and I'm doing none of those. I'm using paint

in a kind of experiment to find out what happens with the paint. - Marcia Hafif

71. Painting is about the extreme moments when speech doesn't help anymore. - Francesco Clemente

72. I painted myself out of my painting. - Milton Resnick

73. The happiest part of making paintings is when they go out the door and into the world. - Agnes Martin

74. Enjoying Suzanne P. Hudson's Robert Ryman: Used Paint (MIT, 2009) which addresses Ryman's assertion that what engaged him was not what to paint but how to paint.

75. I don't know what I'm doing or how I do what I do, but I know that I feel compelled to do it and to keep doing it until I reach that point where something clicks and I stop.

76. I don't listen to what art critics say. I don't know anybody who needs a critic to find out what art is. - Jean-Michel Basquiat

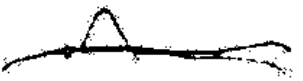
77. To talk about paintings is not only difficult but perhaps pointless too. You can only express in words what words are capable of expressing - what language can communicate. Painting has nothing to do with that. - Gerhard Richter

78. Rothko recommended that viewers position themselves as little as eighteen inches away from the canvas to experience a sense of intimacy, awe, a transcendence of the individual and a sense of the unknown . . . of being engulfed by the painting or becoming a part of it. The barrier between the art and the audience vanishes. . . . The lack of frames on

his pictures is because of this. According to Rothko, framing a painting implies that there exists a different reality in the work. But he did not distinguish between the canvas and the world outside. The intention was to "eliminate all obstacles between the painter and the idea and between the idea and the observer." - Mayank Jain

79. One could say that any child could make a drawing like Twombly only in the sense that any fool with a hammer could fragment sculptures as Rodin did, or any house painter could spatter paint as well as Pollock. In none of these cases would it be true. In each case the art lies not so much in the finesse of the individual mark, but in the orchestration of a previously uncodified set of personal "rules" about where to act and where not, how far to go and when to stop, in such a way as the cumulative courtship of seeming chaos defines an original, hybrid kind of order, which in turn illuminates a complex sense of human experience not voiced or left marginal in previous art. - Kirk Varnedoe

80. Painting is a language. - James Bishop



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